

# A Daughter of the House Boat

THE STORY OF MISS MARY CULLER  
WHITE AND HER WORK IN CHINA



The Mississippi—Miss Mary Culler White's House Boat

WOMAN'S DEPARTMENT, BOARD OF MISSIONS  
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## A DAUGHTER OF THE HOUSE BOAT

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THE little muddy stream, called by courtesy a river, which flowed past the town of Hawkinsville, Ga., was the only body of water that little Mary Culler White had ever seen, but her childish heart was stirred as she stood on the bank wishing she might *go somewhere on a boat*. On a few red-letter days she was allowed to go a little way on the river in a leaky, flat-bottom thing called a batteau. On these occasions she invariably returned with her clothes ruined, but with her ardor undampened by the moist condition of her craft. She wondered if the time would ever come when she would get on a boat and not have to get right off again.

The years sped by, and the little girl, now grown to young womanhood, entered Wesleyan College, in Macon, Ga. Although separated from her town, she was not separated from her river, and when as an art student she went out sketching, it was to the banks of this same mud-colored stream, where she tried to paint its charm and to forget its unartistic hue.

And now another ambition held the young woman. If she could not float down some river to the land of fortune in Tom Sawyer fashion, she would paint her way out into the great world. After college she saved her money, and every summer she went somewhere to study her profession. It was a beautiful world that opened before her, and

she loved it every bit—the smell of the paint in the studio, the feel of her well-loaded palette on her thumb, the folding easel and camp stool of sketching days, and always the joy of seeing bare canvas turn into something that expressed, in part at least, the thing that she saw.

Then came sorrow. Her mother, her best beloved, was taken out of her life. Art was beautiful, but art was cold; she must find comfort. Gropingly, she prayed, and the pitying Father heard and answered. Comfort came, and with it the certainty of God. Church work followed, for her mother's unfinished tasks must be carried on. One day she read a sentence in Black Rock, where Mrs. Mayor was speaking to a British artist who had just left his profession to join Mr. and Mrs. Mayor in their work for the men of the Canadian lumber camps. "I thought," said the lady, "that you would give up painting pictures that the world does not really need and go to making the *lives* that the world is so sorely in need of." When Mary Culler White finished reading, she passed judgment on her own work and stood condemned. By no stretch of the imagination could the world be said to be in need of the pictures that she could paint. Did it need the lives that she, by God's help, could make?

Shortly after this Miss Emma Tucker held a revival meeting in Hawkinsville. Before the meeting the young woman had wanted to be good, but with reservations. She wanted a vacation now and then—a vacation from being good. During the meeting she caught a vision of service, and



with glad abandon she threw herself into the work of winning her friends and associates to Jesus Christ. The little boat of her childish dreams was forgotten. Her life was now the boat, and she made Jesus Christ its Captain.

Thus did Mary Culler White make the consecration that afterwards led her to China. She had no thought of China at the time, for the chart of her life was hidden from her view. She simply looked around for something to do and began with the thing that was nearest at hand. Joining with a few mature women of her Church, she started a work for the social outcasts of her town. It was hard, harder far than going to the foreign field, for people talked about her, and she was only twenty-four; but she kept it up. One day, while looking for a certain passage in the Bible which she was unable to find, she said to herself: "What I need is training; I must go somewhere to study the Bible."

Within a few months she was laying her plans to enter the Scarritt Bible and Training School in Kansas City. Her friends protested, saying, "You are a college graduate and a successful Christian worker; why go away to study?" But she shook her head, saying: "I must learn the kings of Israel; and I must learn to be logical." So off to Scarritt she went.

Poverty is the normal state of the typical Scarritt student; indeed, it is a part of the *esprit de corps* of the student body. Mary Culler White was true to type. She had entered Scarritt without sufficient funds and had worked her way by answering the door-

bell. At the end of the first year she found herself too poor to go to Georgia, too poor to stay where she was; so she sought for work during the vacation months and found it in St. Louis as a pastor's assistant, a position that paid high in valuable experience and low in dollars and cents. Up and down the streets in the scorching sun she walked, her well-worn Bible in her left arm, in much the same position that her palette had been wont to lie; its chapters and verses seemed to her like the pigment with which her old palette had been loaded. "I am still painting," she said softly, "but with another medium. At Scarritt I have learned how to mix the colors of the verses and to bring out the values. Had it not been for Scarritt, I would be daubing instead of painting."

The decision to go to China was reached during her last year at the Training School. Six months later she was seated on the steamship China as that vessel steamed out of the Golden Gate on its way to the land whose name it bore. The forgotten dream of her childhood was coming true. She was "*going somewhere on a boat.*"

China, language study, and a long routine of teaching English to the aspiring Celestials—these were the hard facts; whereas Mary Culler White wanted to be out in the evangelistic field preaching the gospel to China's women. But the young woman comforted herself with the thought that the authorities might assign her to work she wanted when she was older and had had more experience. So she gladly served seven years for the Rachel of her desire—and

then—had her Leah! She understood how Jacob felt, but, like him, she made a second bargain and worked right on until Rachel was her own. Now this Rachel was nothing more or less than the privilege of going from town to town, and village to village within a given district, preaching the gospel to the women of the little congregations that were forming. And O, joy, there were no roads! The only highways were the canals that meshed the plains, connecting every town and hamlet. Hence the only travel was by boat. Little dream girl, come back! You are not only going *somewhere* on a boat; you are going *everywhere* on a boat, and taking rich cargo with you.

Then, would you believe it, a lady in Mississippi heard that Mary Culler White was itinerating in China and gave the money for her to have a house boat of her own. Now, a house boat is a boat that is built to be used as a house, a house that can move around. You can live on it, eat on it, sleep on it, work on it, and you can even go to bed at night in one place and wake up in the morning at another, provided the second place is not too far away, for the house boat is built to *amble*, not to run. Its highest speed is six miles an hour. When a strong head wind is blowing, you must tie up to the bank, get out all your neglected correspondence, and wait until the clouds roll by.

The boat was named the Mississippi in honor of the Mississippi lady. It has three cabins—a front one for company, a middle one for the Bible women, and a rear one for the missionary. The boatmen sleep on the open deck or in the pigeon-hole loft above



the missionary's cabin. The cooking is done in a miniature hold beneath the stern deck. The entire boat, including the decks, measures thirty-five feet in length and eight feet in width.

Whenever the boat stopped in a country place, its front deck furnished a pulpit from which to preach to the crowd which always gathered to see the "foreigner." When it was anchored in a city, its main cabin became a parlor in which ladies in silken robes were received and served with the unsweetened tea and parched water-melon seed which the occasion demanded. When in the country, the boat became a schoolroom to which wistful women came and were taught to read the strange ideographs of their own language; when at a village where there were no Christians, it became a singing school for the peasant women, who would gather after a hard day's work and sing the words of the hymns, whether they could sing the tune or not. Sometimes when a country trip was drawing to a close, a patient would be found who needed to go to a hospital; then the boat would become an ambulance for the time being. But, best of all, the house boat was an altar where united prayer was offered by the missionary and her Bible women, and where, at times, souls were born into the kingdom. One Christmas day, in the city of Changshu, the missionary had tried all day to find some new soul to offer to Christ as a Christmas gift. It was Sunday, and she had spent the entire day at the church, where she had eaten her dinner of Chinese food. The afternoon meeting for

the women had been prolonged until the shades of night were falling, but no new believers had been found. The tired worker was disappointed, and she told the Bible women that she must make a call before returning to the boat; when she reached the home of the woman who had seemed almost ready to believe, she found her away; this, too, was fruitless. The baffled missionary then turned her reluctant feet toward her floating home. It was night now, and as there was to be no evening service, all hope of finding the gift for Christ seemed gone. While the boatmen were preparing the supper, three guests came on board. They had had an early supper and had come to spend the evening. All three were young women who had been connected in some way with Christian families; yet they themselves were not followers of Christ. The missionary's heart gave a bound; perhaps she would find her gift yet. Supper was postponed while the missionary pressed home the claim of him whose birthday it was. All the pent-up longings of the day found vent in her words. Time was forgotten. Sometime later—the missionary did not know how long—she saw that her hearers were softening. She asked that they kneel in prayer; down on the floor of the house boat they knelt, and the missionary prayed, followed by the Bible women. Then, one by one, haltingly, but earnestly, the guests prayed and gave themselves to Jesus Christ. The birthday gift had been given, and that in triple measure.

They rose from their knees; the delayed supper was reheated and brought in, and the



missionary and the Bible women ate and rejoiced at the same time. Following the supper, the lady of the house boat, now in festive mood, got out the gifts which her friends had slipped on the boat just before it sailed; she had had no time to look at them earlier; but now that she had offered a gift to Christ, her own gifts took on a new significance. The newly converted friends sat by and enjoyed it all—the pretty ribbons with which the packages were tied, the dainty contents whose uses they did not know, and the chocolate candy which they ate and did not like. O, it was a glorious Christmas day that the grown-up dream girl had on her own house boat in an interior Chinese city, twenty-five miles away from any human being of her own race.

She had gone somewhere on a boat.